

September 2001

## I, User- The Selector in the Garden: Do Palm Pilots Dream of Electronic Slips?

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### Recommended Citation

Lugg, Rick and Fischer, Ruth (2001) "I, User- The Selector in the Garden: Do Palm Pilots Dream of Electronic Slips?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 13: Iss. 4, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3600>

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## Distance Education

Meanwhile, distance education technologies have provided a way to address all three problems. Various technologies have been used to provide education to students who cannot come to a central campus. At the **University of South Carolina**, we use a combination of TV, meetings at central sites, and other means to offer such education. Others have used full-motion video and, of course, everyone uses the Web and other communications protocols such as email and chat these days. There are courses on CD also that can be used for course work or continuing education so the mix of technologies provides many methods to offer courses. Library education is partially competitive and partially cooperative. There are slightly fewer than 660 FTE faculty reported in the 2000 ALISE report.<sup>7</sup> It is a small universe and virtually everyone knows faculty in other schools. These faculty and their institutions cooperate in some areas and in others they compete.

In addressing the issues of critical mass, remedying the loss of necessary aspects of the curriculum, and augmentation of the curriculum, there are two futures to distance education courses taught by these faculty: cooperation or competition. If we cooperate, we may be able to form consortia of schools for cooperative Web-based (or whatever new technology comes along) courses from other institutions. One could imagine different kinds of cooperative efforts.

- It is possible to have basic courses offered by a few schools via the Web that would permit the other programs to offer courses in areas not currently covered by their faculties. In addition, basic courses could be of varying levels of difficulty to handle the problem of disparate skills levels: beginning people in the same class with highly skilled people. Perhaps we could separate students into different Web-based classes by skill level with the new offerings. Schools relying on basic courses from the Web could also teach the advanced courses locally.
- Programs with specialties such as archives, data analysis, or school media could supply other programs with enhanced content that is normally difficult to get for students interested in areas not taught locally. Interested faculty could develop their skills and new classes in advanced areas rather than everyone teaching the same introductory classes. If there were several consortia, then there would be variation and choice for students where they would be able to select from a wider variety of courses at their library schools and those of consortia members. Of course, there would have to be adjustments at the various institutions and these adjustments would not all be easy ones to make. But, this kind of plan could ameliorate the three problems discussed above.

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# I, User — The Selector in the Garden: Do Palm Pilots Dream of Electronic Slips?

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**T**he machine long has been in the garden. **Paul Bunyan's** ax failed against the chainsaw; **John Henry** died trying to match a steam driver. And these were mythic heroes of Herculean stature, suggesting that the tools of automation must easily overmatch the rest of us. Closer to home, **Nicholson Baker**, after decrying the loss of card catalogs to online systems in 1994, is now resurrected with a book about the destruction of periodicals in favor of microfilm. Following **Baker, Bunyan, and Henry**, in this column we ask our version of the question: Must technology always win, and manual methods always fail?

Approval plans rely considerably on slips or forms that are sent to a library when a new title fits a profile. As vendor online systems, such as **Blackwell's Collection Manager** and **YBP's GOBI**, have grown stronger, the dealers have encouraged libraries to replace paper forms with their electronic equivalent. The motivations of the booksellers are obvious enough: paper slips must be printed, burst, handled, and mailed, all actions that cost money additional to the forms on which the information is printed. Electronic slips exist in the computer anyway, and selectors simply access them over the Internet. At present, vendors must bear the costs of both paper and electronic slips. Clearly, the booksellers hope librarians will use e-forms, and nascent rumblings about charges for paper slips are distant thunder.

But which is better for libraries, which better for librarians -- that is, users? And which is better for selectors, which for acquisitions?

## Part 1: Selection

E-slips are available days, as much as a week, before paper slips arrive in the mail. An organized bibliographer determined to choose books

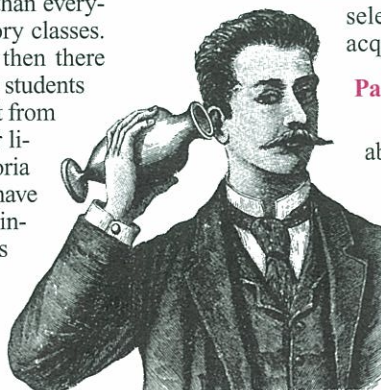
before her peers, and so improve the chance that suppliers will fill the orders from stock, gains a significant advantage through immediate online selection.

But how many selectors are so organized? Rather than review e-slips before paper ones arrive, most selectors, pressed by other duties, wait days, weeks, or even months to look at new slips. Right? The question is, then, if the few days e-forms gain for us are seldom used, how do the two formats compare as media for selection?

The worst thing about e-slips is that they bind you to a computer and an Internet connection. (**Blackwell's** has recently introduced **eNotes**, in which slip files can be downloaded to Palm and other PDA devices. This will prove a fascinating experiment, but it's still too early to judge the extent to which this might change selector behavior. It may, in fact, provide an excellent topic for a subsequent **I, User** column.) In some respects, e-slips are a much less malleable medium than paper ones. As an appliance, in fact, paper slips are like the books for which they stand, with some well-known additional advantages of their own. That is, they are portable, tactile, reliable, and familiar, and they are sortable into piles. And while PDA-based e-slips are certainly portable, they introduce still more variables into the workflow. How and when are selected titles uploaded from the PDA to the vendor system? The library system? Who in the library will troubleshoot download problems? Etc.

Even if you always review forms at your desk, paper still wins, because reviewing and selecting electronically can be much slower. That's right. Waiting for an afternoon Internet connection even to reach a Website, logging onto the vendor's database, bringing up slips, then scrolling up and down to see a record, and clicking around an order screen takes longer, much longer, than going directly to paper slips and sorting those for the books you want into ordered piles. Try it. We guarantee, **Paul Bunyan** and **John Henry's** losses notwithstanding,

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that the manual method will win the race over the technological solution.

Ahhh, would that life were straightforward. E-slips can and often do carry more information than paper. The bibliographic records in vendor systems might include tables of contents, jacket scans, links to alternate editions, and links outward to reviews and enhanced descriptions, either at the publisher's Website or at third-party sites. As the ONIX standard becomes more widely adopted, the amount and quality of online information will increase, making e-slips still more valuable than their paper surrogates.

E-slips can be copied, pasted, and shipped around by email, and **Blackwell's** can deliver relevant forms directly to faculty, who can select and return them to the library. In **YBP's** system, a "Selected by" note with initials appears below the form until it is ordered, alerting one selector that another has chosen a title, suggesting, at least, the means to collect cooperatively.

For selection, then, the advantages of e-forms are useful but not yet compelling, and their disadvantages may be decisive when you cannot review your slips at the reference desk, on the train, or in front of the TV. For now, the twin liabilities of being slow to use and yoking us to a computer will prevent any mass defections from paper. The popularity of eNotes on PDAs remains to be seen, but bears watching.

## The Devil's Advocate from page 38

Our other future is that we can compete... the rich will get richer and be able to offer fuller programs via distance education than the poorer schools. Schools do not compete for students as much as one might suppose because students often attend nearby library schools. However, when students have a choice—and all Web-based programs are, practically, local—smaller programs are not likely to be able to compete.

If the past is prologue, I am betting that we will see the competitive model, dominated eventually by a few institutions, run by people some of whom have worked in a library. Cooperation in the library world is more of an individual rather than an institutional thing, pious flapdoodle to the contrary notwithstanding.

This choice is before us whether we are conscious of it or not and the decisions we make or do not make today will affect what choices are available in the future. I think

## Part 2. Acquisitions

Even if mass defections from paper are not likely when selectors are left to their own methods, acquisitions may gain so significantly when bibliographers use e-forms, that in the interest of overall efficiency, selectors in some libraries are now being required to use electronic slips. When an acquisitions department receives paper, any number of processes are possible, but all require considerable keying along the way.


By contrast, when bibliographers select online, acquisitions can process and bring the choices into the library system in batches. If not eliminated, one-at-a-time download of records and duplicate checking can be greatly reduced. Not every library system supports the scenario and to make it work requires expense, training, and workflow accommodations. But in general, less keying and batch processing are acquisitions efficiencies that come with the use of e-forms. From a library administrator's point of view, adoption of electronic slips and online selection may lower the overall cost of acquiring books, even if it requires more time from selectors.


## What's Coming?

If the machine need not prevent us from selecting slips in the garden now, it soon could. Advantages of e-notification to the approval dealers are sufficient enough that they are remaking their tools for online selection and acquisitions in hopes of rendering them as indispensable as online catalogs. Among the improvements will be

searchable tables of contents, "carts" for making electronic piles of slips, and the ability to assign priority levels to groups of titles. The dealers hope to improve the speed with which e-slips can be reviewed and to make them individually loadable as **MARC** records into a library system for purposes of duplicate checking.

For now, slips are mostly reviewed and processed in a combination of print and electronic form, mirroring the gradual transition from print to electronic form in journals and books. It's a hybrid, cyborg-type world, in which selectors initially sort paper slips, and move online to seek additional information about specific titles, especially those that are borderline, interdisciplinary, or may already be held by a nearby library or consortium partner. Communication to acquisitions may occur via paper slip, electronic slip, or both. Acquisitions may prefer an electronic slip with fund code and location indicated, but can still deal with paper slips with handwritten notations. Sometimes the paper, sometimes the machine -- each used for what it does best.

On the other hand, it could be that we can have the machine AND the garden, if a service like **Blackwell's eNotes** is embraced by selectors. But then, to use that service, we'd all have to own (and use) one of those palm things. And what about them? Are they another perfidious means to steal our time or brilliant tools for improving our work lives? Can we save the garden by bringing yet more technology into it? 

we are already well along the way down the wrong fork of this road. 


## Endnotes

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6. **Michael Gorman**, "library schools.com," *California Libraries* 10 (2000): 3.
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## Rumors from page 34

from **Providence College** on the 20th of August. He got to walk across the stage with her and give her her diploma. The college has a tradition that faculty who have immediate family graduating cross the stage with the family member and get the diploma from the president. Then, the professor gives the diploma to the family member instead of the president. Afterwards, **Norm** and **Jeanne** headed off on white water raft trip on the Dead River in Maine!

And, guess what? At **ALA** in San Francisco, **Papa Lyman** (yes, he is always working; why don't you tell him he needs to write more *Papas?*), and I had supper with **Peter Wiley** who's just completed a fabulous book, *National Trust Guide San Francisco: America's Guide for Architecture and History Travelers* by **Peter Booth Wiley**, **John Wiley & Sons**, 2000. Hopefully, **Peter** will be in **Charleston** in November!

Speaking of which, see you in **Charleston**! If you haven't registered, visit <http://www.cofc.edu/library/conference>. Get to it! 

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>